

When We Are Very Young
Episode 12 : Conflict Resolution
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In a conflict or a fight, both sides are hurting the other, whereas in a reconciliation, one person hurt another. Parents need to help children repair their relationship after a conflict. Parents can help guide their children through the steps of conflict resolution rather than try to act as police, judge and jury. At the end of the process, the conflict is resolved and relationships are healed. No further punishment or consequences are necessary. Parents need to coach and support throughout the dialogue.

Let's use an example of two brothers getting into a fight. Robbi 14 years old, comes home from school in a foul mood. His basketball coach yelled at him a few times in practice and he felt humiliated. Jason, age 12 is playing video games, getting frustrated, and yelling at the screen. Robbi yells at Jason to shut up. Jason tells Robbi where to go and how the get there. Robbi, feeling like he can discipline his younger brother, yanks the controller out of Jason's hands and tells him not to use curse

words. Jason reacts by trying to physically get the controller back, pushing and shoving follows and the parent comes in the front door to hear this physical and verbal fight going on. Taking a breath to remain calm, the parent says sharply STOP! Both boys freeze, not expecting the parent at that moment.

Parent: Boys, please go and sit down. Robbi you sit there. Jason you sit there. Before either of you speak, I want you to sit for a minute and calm down. When you feel calm, you can tell me you are ready.

The parent sits too and waits, watching for signs of calm.

Jason, after a few seconds says: I'm ready, that jerk just came....

Parent: Jason you are not ready. Please sit quietly and calm yourself.

After 2 or 3 minutes, Robbi says he's ready and Jason says he is too. With three people, sitting calmly, you can proceed. It might be hard to get to this point in some families. This is a higher order task that is difficult until children have learned to trust their parent and self-regulate or at least allow their parent to re-regulate them. You may still be at the stage of focusing on

regulation. If you can get to this point, you are ready to start the conflict resolution.

Here are the steps that can help you move from conflict to repair.

Step 1. Have one person tell about his experience, feelings and what he or she needs. Since Robbi was the one to say fist that he was ready, he might be the one to go first.

Parent: Robbi can you please tell us, from your point of view, what happened (just the facts), what you are feeling and what you need.

Robbi: OK so Jason...

Parent: Robbi, please use your experience. Start with "I".

Robbi: Yeah, sorry, dad. (Robbi, has done this before!). I had a really crap practice. Coach was on me all the time. I came home in a really bad mood. Jason was yelling at his video game and I got really irritated by it. I guess I needed some peace and quiet and I guess I wanted to take it out on him.

Parent: Very good, Robbi. Thank you Robbi.

Step 2. Now we have the other person repeat what the first person said. Be certain there is understanding without defensiveness.

Parent: Now Jason, can you please tell us what Robbi's experience was?

Jason: He just came in here--

Parent: Jason, I need you to tell what it was like for Robbi so I know you understand his side of this. Then it will be your turn to tell your side. Go ahead Jason.

Jason: So Robbi said that he sucked at basketball today--- Sorry Robbi said his coach yelled at him today and he came home mad and then took it out on me.

Parent: OK you got that he was having a bad day and that he was upset and you missed what he needed.

Jason: He said he needed some quiet.

Parent: Good work, Jason.

Step 3 is to have the second person tell about his experience, feelings and what he needs. You will talk more about feelings at this point.

Parent: OK Jason, now you can tell us what this was like for you, and what your feelings were and what you need.

Jason: I just wanted to play video games and Robbi jumped all over me. I was angry and frustrated and just needed to be left alone to play.

Step 4: The first person, in this case Robbi, repeats what the other person, Jason, said. Be certain that there is understanding without defensiveness.

Robbi: Jason just wants to be left alone to play and I made him mad.

Now both kids are calm and both have seen the other person's side of the experience.

Step 5 is to have everyone think of as many solutions to the problem as possible. Think of ideas are creative, unusual and very different. Think from many perspectives. This step can be fun since no idea is too silly or foolish to bring forward. Once an idea is put on the table, it belongs to the group. Everyone has to release their attachment to their own suggestions.

Parent: OK guys, come up with some solutions to our joint problem. Robbi needs quiet and Jason wants to play video games. How might this work out for both of you?

Jason: I could wear my headphones to play and try to keep quiet!

Robbi: I could take my homework upstairs.

These are simple solutions, easy to come by if you are calm and have support. This whole thing might have taken 10 or 15 minutes. The goal is to help your children be less reactive and more empathic in their actions.

Step 6: After the solutions are offered, then the best one is selected and agreed upon.

The most important aspect of this process is that the result is an end to the conflict and a repair of the relationships. Once the process is completed, the solution must be followed. Children need to be in a regulated emotional state to begin this process. It can take a few attempts to get through to the end, as children may require soothing and re-regulating. It helps to have the steps written out and to practice with a made-up scenario (one that is silly and funny would help keep their interest!). As skills increase, the dialogue becomes: When you....., I feel....., and I need you

to..... . I will..... to help that happen. It is very important for parents to model these steps in their own conflict resolutions.

References and Resources:

1. www.journeyofpeace.ca This series of stories is being used in Afghanistan to help children affected by war. See especially the story entitled Making Peace. See also the teachers' manual on this chapter.
2. Marshall Rosenberg: Non-violent communication. There are a few books by Marshall that are very helpful in finding ways to communicate to facilitate peaceful communication.